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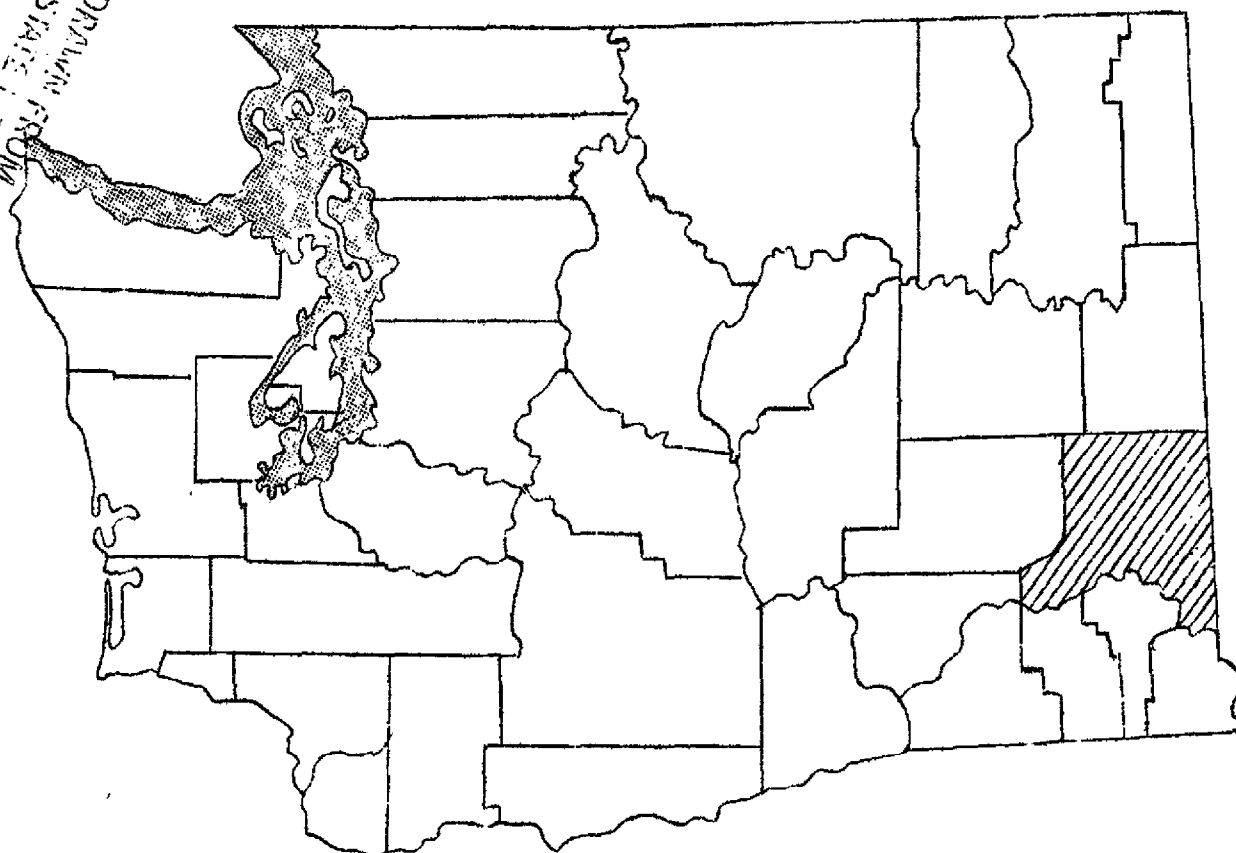
WHITMAN COUNTY AGRICULTURE WASHINGTON

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COUNTY AGRICULTURAL DATA SERIES
1965



WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Donald W. Moe, Director

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Statistical Reporting Service
Harry C. Trelogan

WASHINGTON CROP AND LIVESTOCK REPORTING SERVICE
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FOREWORD

This bulletin on Whitman County is one of a second edition series devoted to presenting the history and present nature of agriculture in each of the thirty-nine counties of the State of Washington. The original series was initiated in 1956 by the Washington State Department of Agriculture. State funds were matched by moneys from the United States Department of Agriculture under the Research and Marketing Act of 1946.

County agricultural data books are intended to serve a variety of needs. Continually changing conditions in a dynamic state such as Washington require constant planning by groups and individuals, especially in the field of marketing agricultural products. Knowledge of land resources, population and agricultural-economic trends in a local area such as Whitman County is of great value. This book will be useful for reference in public and private instruction by social studies teachers. It has been devised also to inform adults interested in knowing more about their immediate area.

Selected geographic facts, agricultural history, population trends and statistical data are included to give an overall appreciation of Whitman County. Enumerations of the United States Censuses of Population and Agriculture are summarized to give a perspective of development since the establishment of Whitman County. Facts on topography, soil, climate and forest which influence farming are integrated from surveys and reports of government agencies. Estimates of leading crops by years since 1939 by the Washington Crop and Livestock Reporting Service provide a measure of the trend in the agriculture of the county farm industry.

Acknowledgment is accorded the professional work of several persons. Immediate direction was under Emery C. Wilcox, Agricultural Statistician in Charge, Field Operations Division, Statistical Reporting Service, United States Department of Agriculture. Research involved in up-dating and revising the original information and the preparation of the manuscript of the second edition of the Whitman County bulletin were performed by George K. Saito, Research Analyst, Washington State Department of Agriculture. Editing of the first draft of the present bulletin was done by Emery C. Wilcox. Agricultural Statisticians of the Washington Crop and Livestock Reporting Service gave valuable assistance. Margaret B. Quiroga, Washington State Department of Agriculture, typed all of the textual and tabular material and prepared the graphs. The bulletins were reproduced and assembled by members of the clerical staff of the Washington Crop and Livestock Reporting Service.

Olympia, Washington
June 15, 1965

Donald W. Moos, Director
Washington State Department of Agriculture

Funds for this bulletin provided by the Washington State Department of Agriculture were matched by the United States Department of Agriculture under the Research and Marketing Act of 1946.

PART I

HISTORY OF WHITMAN COUNTY AGRICULTURE

Introduction

Whitman County is located in the Palouse Hills region of southeastern Washington. It borders Idaho on the east, Spokane and Lincoln Counties on the north and Adams and Franklin Counties on the west. The Snake River sets Whitman off from other counties to the south. Within the boundaries of Whitman County are some of the most productive wheat fields in the nation. Agriculture in the area, particularly the production of wheat, has developed to place Whitman among the leading counties in the United States in terms of value of farm products sold.

With an area of 2,179 square miles (approximately 1,394,560 acres), Whitman is twelfth in size among the thirty-nine Washington counties. According to the latest Census of Agriculture (1959), the entire county was in farms and about 48 percent, or 669,672 acres, was in harvested cropland. Whitman County's croplands are mostly farmed on a dryland basis and only a small portion is irrigated. Less than one percent of the county is wooded and most of the area's woodland is pastured.

Since the middle of the last century, the area which is now Whitman County has been settled and developed by immigrants from eastern United States and Europe who were attracted by its agricultural opportunities. The economic history of the county is characterized by a change from an early emphasis on livestock production to the present dominance of commercial wheat farming. Today, Whitman ranks second among the Washington counties in value of all farm products sold annually.

History 1/

Prior to the coming of the white man, Indians were the sole claimant to the land now occupied by Whitman County. Four different groups inhabited the area. The upper Spokane and Couer d'Alene tribes, both using the Salish language, lived to the north near present Spokane County. Palus (Palouse) Indians occupied the major part of what is today Whitman County. Their name was given to the river which drains most of the area and to the rolling hill formation which characterize the topography. The Nez Perce Indians frequently migrated into the region. They camped in the southeastern section and were friendly with the Palus who spoke the

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same Sahaptin tongue. The four Indian groups had a similar livelihood. They all possessed domesticated horses. In the winter, they lived in villages along major streams and caught fish. During other seasons of the year, the Indians traveled into the upland forest and grasslands where they hunted for deer and elk, dug for camas roots and collected berries and pine nuts.

The coming of the white man into the region eventually led to Indian Wars. There was open hostility throughout most of eastern Washington from 1847 to 1858. Among the most famous incidents during this period was the Whitman Massacre in the Walla Walla Valley in 1847. In the area now occupied by Whitman County, three companies of the U. S. Cavalry commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. Steptoe were defeated on May 17, 1858 near present Rosalia. After Steptoe's retreat from the Palouse Valley, the Army initiated a vigorous campaign in eastern Washington which eventually subdued the Indians. The last war in the area involved the Nez Perce led by Chief Joseph. By 1883, most of the Indians were on various reservations in the Pacific Northwest established by the Indian Treaty of 1855.

Agricultural settlement in the Palouse country began around 1868. Cattlemen from the earlier settled Walla Walla Valley were attracted by the natural grassland which covered most of present Whitman County. Cattle were driven north across the Snake River into the vast range of rich grasses. The lower Palouse Valley, Alkali Flat and Union Flat Creek were the first areas used for grazing. Large numbers of wild horses which roamed the Palouse Hills were rounded up and sold at Baker, Oregon. Cattle were also moved to Baker for shipment on the Union Pacific Railway.

At first, settlement under the Homestead Act of 1862 proceeded slowly in the Palouse country. One of the reasons for the slow beginning was the area's relative isolation. The hilly nature of the country, the lack of extensive timber stands and the general opinion that the area was not suited for cultivation also tended to discourage early permanent settlements. The first settlers farmed numerous small creek bottoms and were unaware of the immense fertility of the sloping hill land covered with bunchgrass. It was not until around 1877 that it was discovered that the soils of the hills were excellent for growing wheat. This discovery, credited by some to a Mr. Calhoun of Rosalia, led to a rapid change from livestock to wheat farming. Population and farming expanded into all the upland districts.

The basin of the South Fork of the Palouse River was the initial center of early settlement. J. A. Perkins, H. S. Hollingsworth and James Ewart homesteaded land in the Colfax district from 1870 to 1877. In 1871, Whitman County was established by the Washington Territorial Legislature and the county government was placed in the community of Colfax. The county was named in honor of the massacred missionary, Marcus Whitman, who had introduced Christianity to this portion of Washington before his death in 1847. During the late 1870's, Bolin Farr and others settled in the Pullman District. The city of Pullman was founded in 1882 and nine years later Washington State College was established there. Modoc Smith was the first settler in the area around Palouse when he began farming there in 1875.

From 1870 to 1910 a land rush and a steady expansion of wheat farming increased the population from 7,014 to 33,280. During the 1880's, local farmers experimented with several varieties of wheat and with different dry farming practices. They found the Palouse soil and climate ideal for high yields of wheat. In 1888, Second Lieutenant Frank Greene of the U. S. Army submitted a report to the War Department relating the high capability of this interior region for growing

grain. Wide attention was given to the area as a place for immigrants to settle on farms. According to the Census of Agriculture, acreage in wheat increased rapidly from 110,477 acres in 1890 to 280,194 in 1900.

At first, only spring wheat was planted because winters were considered too severe for fall planted wheat. Soon it was found that wheat planted in fall could survive the Palouse winters and would give a higher yield than those sown in spring. The first important wheat variety in the area was Little Club which was introduced from California. Later, Fortyfold, a Colonial American type of soft wheat, was brought from New York and became the most common variety. Wheat farming was pushed westward into the drier area of Whitman County by using the Pacific Bluestem variety introduced from Australia via California and Turkey Red brought from Kansas. Most of the wheat grown in this early period was of the soft varieties, good for local use but low in quality for sale to flour mills.

Vessels plying the Snake and Columbia Rivers permitted an early but limited export of Palouse wheat. The Oregon Railroad and Navigation Company loaded wheat at several points along the Snake River between 1876 and 1900. Wheat was hauled to Portland, Oregon for export to Europe around Cape Horn. Early Palouse farmers were handicapped by long wagon hauls of grain to river ports and high freight costs.

Construction of railroad facilities in the area was started by the Northern Pacific Railway Company and the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company in 1879. By 1883, branch railroads of the Northern Pacific were hauling wheat out of Whitman County. Railroads not only greatly facilitated the marketing of wheat and other grains but also brought many settlers from eastern United States and Europe into the county.

Mechanization of wheat farming began in Whitman County about 1890. Production increased greatly as seed drillers, large horse-drawn combines and stationary steam threshers came into general use. The introduction later of modern combines adapted to steep slopes also contributed to a changing pattern of agriculture. Small wheat farms gave way to large farms with extensive wheat fields where the harvesting is done by fewer operators and laborers.

Between 1910 and 1940, the population of Whitman County dropped from 33,280 to 27,221. The mechanization of farming reduced the need for farm labor. Also, the increase in size of farms resulted in fewer farm operators. Many left the county for employment opportunities in the cities and in other farm areas. After 1940, the population increased to 32,469 in 1950 and was at 31,263 in 1960. The main reason for the increase in the number of county residents since 1940 has been the growth of the city of Pullman.

Whitman County has grown from a frontier grassland area used by cattlemen to one specializing in wheat and other grains and it now stands among the richest farm counties in the United States. The value of all farm products sold from Whitman County farms increased greatly from 1940 when it was worth \$10,466,650 to \$31,338,682 in 1949 and to \$51,030,918 in 1959.

Washington State University Experiment Station at Pullman has had an important influence on local wheat farming. A major contribution was made by W. S. Spillman, who began studies on wheat hybrids in the 1890's. The station started releasing hybrid varieties in 1907. The work of the Experiment Station has continued and it has developed important varieties of wheat such as Elmar, Brevor and Gaines. In

more recent years, much work in the improvement of agriculture in the county has been done in conjunction with the Agricultural Research Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture, located at Pullman and by the Pacific Northwest Crop Improvement Association.

1/ The historical summary has been derived from four sources:

- (1) Lever, W. H. An Illustrated History of Whitman County, State of Washington, W. H. Lever, 1901, 469 pp.
- (2) Meinig, Donald W. "Environment and Settlement in the Palouse, 1868-1910", Master of Arts Thesis, geography, University of Washington, Seattle. 156 pp. This is a thorough analysis of the beginning and early development of agriculture in Whitman County compiled from a wide variety of documents.
- (3) Washington, A Guide to the Evergreen State, Federal Works Agency, Works Project Administration "Writers' Program". Published by the Washington Historical Society, 1941. Metropolitan Press, Portland, Oregon. See pages 419-428.
- (4) Perry, Richard M. State of Washington, Bureau of Statistics, "The Counties of Washington", (mimeographed). Issued by Secretary of State, Olympia, Washington, 1943. See section on Whitman County.